

2011 NIV

Written by Rev. C. Bouwman
Published on 19 February 2012



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The January 29 issue of the congregation's *Family Post* contained a mention of a new version of the Bible we commonly use in church and (presumably) at home. People in the know (says this *Family Post*) "put up a cautionary flag" in relation to this new version. Yet the other day one of the Young people at Catechism class read a verse or three from precisely this translation. That's no surprise, actually, for this is the only version of the NIV one can today buy in Canada's (Christian) bookstores. But it shouldn't be found in our midst. Let me explain.

Some History

Over the 50 to 60 years of her existence, the Canadian Reformed Churches have three times changed the Bible translation recommended for use in the churches (and hence in homes). At the first Synod back in 1954, the recent migrants decided to use the King James Version (KJV) in public worship. As the church membership became more proficient with the English language, awareness grew that the language of the KJV was so outdated as to be hard to understand. Consequently, a shift was made in 1971 to the Revised Standard Version (RSV) – even as it was recognized that this translation was not perfect. With the arrival of the New International Version in the 1980s (finalized in 1984), the churches decided in 1995 to recommend the use of NIV for public worship. It was felt that this translation rendered the Word of God in such contemporary English that any reader could grasp the same sense as a Hebrew or Greek reader could grasp in the original languages centuries ago. It seems to me that on the whole the NIV (1984) was well received in the churches. The newest version of the *Book of Praise* also draws its quotes from this NIV.

Development

Built into the translation method of the NIV was the intent to keep the translation in step with changes in the English language. The word "alien" in common English used to mean a "foreigner", but in recent years (because of *ET*) the term now makes a reader think of a visitor from outer space. So it's reasonable that the translation be updated so as to replace the word "alien" (in a passage as Genesis 23:4) with the term "foreigner". We all

understand and appreciate the need for such updating. As a result a revised version of the NIV appeared last year, known popularly as the NIV₂₀₁₁. With the arrival of this new version, the NIV₁₉₈₄ is no longer available.

The revised version of the NIV had been announced some time ago, and so the previous Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches had mandated a Committee for Bible Translation (CBT; our churches have had such a committee for decades) “to thoroughly evaluate the updated NIV translation when it is released in 2011 and to produce and send a report to the churches within nine months of the release date” (see *Acts*, Article 72).

Recently the CBT produced the requested report. The interested can find it at:

<http://canrc.org/?document=8120>.

The report’s conclusion? It’s a thumbs down. Read this:

“...though we found much of the 2011 NIV to be acceptable ... our scales of judgment were tipped in the opposite direction particularly by those passages that concern the special offices in the church. Numerically speaking these passages are few, yet we recognize that they have a weighty effect on the life of the church in practical terms” (page 19).

Result: the Committee draws to the churches’ attention the fact that previous Synods have already listed the New King James Version (NKJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the English Standard Version (ESV) as acceptable translations for the churches to use. Unless, then, the CBT report is found to be badly flawed, we shall soon be moving to a new translation.... Again.

Flawed?

Is the report flawed in its rejection of the NIV₂₀₁₁? I do not believe it is. Consider the following evidence as it relates only to the issue (as the CBT mentions) of the offices of the church:

1. In the 1984 version, the NIV translated 2 Timothy 2:2 as, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” The phrase “reliable men” translates accurately the Greek original, which is distinctly masculine in its formulation. The 2011 edition replaces the phrase “reliable men” with the gender-neutral phrase “reliable people” on the understanding that the term “men” can sometimes (in Greek and in English) be used generically to refer to both genders. Our committee writes, “This is an unwarranted neutralizing of a text that ought to be gender-specific. The use of ‘people’ in this verse has the potential to be misleading in a consideration of the special offices of the church.” Good call, in my judgment.
2. As an example of a revised text our committee did not mention (they can’t, of course, mention them all), consider Romans 16:7. The NIV₁₉₈₄ has, “Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles....” The new rendition has changed the name “Junias” to “Junia”. We need to know: Greek names ending in *s* are commonly men’s names, while those ending in *a* are commonly women’s names. And yes, the Greek is such that one can indeed translate the name of the person concerned as either Junias (a man) or Junia (a woman). So what’s the issue? Consider the next phrase,

“they are outstanding among the apostles.” That phrase could have two meanings, namely, the apostles think Andronicus and Junias/Junia are outstanding *or* Andronicus and Junias/Junia are outstanding in the ranks of the apostles. The latter possibility means that the Bible itself mentions a female apostle. And if a female could be an apostle back then, why can a female not be an office bearer today.... As it is, the Bible is emphatic in other places that sisters of the congregation are not to hold positions of authority or teach in church (cf 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12). And the Greek distinctly allows for the masculine name Junias.... So why would the NIV₂₀₁₁ opt for the feminine name Junia? This text, and so many more, point up the new NIV’s practice of removing male-oriented details of meaning from the text of the Bible.[\[1\]](#)

Given passages as these, I very much concur with the conclusion of our Committee on Bible Translation: this version ought not to be used in the churches.

More

You’ll recall the words I quoted earlier from the CBT report, that the passages referring to women in the special offices of the church are “numerically speaking ... few.” That’s indeed true, when it comes to explicit texts of the nature of those mentioned above. But there are countless other changes in the NIV₂₀₁₁ that has prepared the way for the thinking reflected in those “few” texts that explicitly promote opening the offices of the church to women. Consider. In the NIV₂₀₁₁,

- the so-called “singular *they*” is frequently used as a gender-neutral equivalent to the traditional ‘he’;
- terms as ‘people’ and ‘humans’ are often used to render Greek and Hebrew words that refer specifically to men or women;
- the Greek word *adelphoi* (meaning ‘brothers’) is frequently rendered with the English phrase “brothers and sisters”;
- the term ‘ancestors’ regularly appears where the original languages speak of ‘forefathers’.

The grounds given for such gender-neutral language (instead of the prevalent male language of Scripture) is that the Bible actually wants its readers to think not just of ‘he’ but of ‘he’ *and* ‘she’, not just of ‘brothers’ but of ‘brothers *and* sisters’, not just of ‘forefathers’ but also of ‘foremothers’ (which is cumbersome, and so it becomes ‘ancestors’). Given that the English language has changed in the last few decades to become far more sensitive to the inappropriateness of male-dominated word-choice, it is proper (argue the translators) that an updated version of Scripture also be more sensitive to the unseemliness of male-dominated vocabulary.

Now, I too think that one needs to stay in step with developments in language. We all agree that it will not do to speak 17th century English in today’s society. By extension, it will not do to speak 1970s English to today’s society (though, of course, it would be far more understandable...). I readily grant, then, that a faithful Bible translation needs to stay in step with changes in language.

The need to use contemporary English raises, though, a tricky question. It's this: why do the Hebrew and the Greek texts of Scripture use (what we would call) male-oriented language? The standard answer is: that's because the culture of the day was male dominated. We can grant that indeed the culture of Bible times (be it Abraham's time or Paul's) was male dominated. But the fact that it was male dominated does not in itself mean that *therefore* Moses and Jeremiah and Luke and Paul chose vocabulary that sounds male dominated to our egalitarian-conditioned ears. After all, the writers of Scripture time and time again go out of their way to *counter* what was culturally acceptable. On the pages of Scripture women receive far *more* protection and esteem than was customary in secular society of the time. That's true in the writings of Moses (in contrast to the place accorded to women in Egypt) as well as in the days of Jesus (in contrast to the place the Jews commonly accorded to women). The point: if the Lord God had wanted His writers not to sound 'male dominated' He would have seen to it that they formulate their thoughts in a manner distinct from the culture around them.

Deeper

Back, then, to the question of why the Biblical text uses the pronoun 'he' or 'his' to refer to both genders when the reference is not to men only (eg, Leviticus 2:1). And why does the Bible use the term 'brothers' when the reference obviously includes also the sisters (cf Philippians 3:1; 4:1)? That's because the Lord has created the human race in such a way that the man is the head and the woman is not. So much is the man, by God's ordinance, meant to be the head that his wife (and children) is included in the man; a reference to the head of the family (singular, male) includes his family. When God, for example, established His covenant with Abraham, God did not form a bond of love simply with the individual Abraham, but with his wife Sarah also; she was included in Abraham from the start. Behind the Bible's use of male-oriented vocabulary lies God's revelation about the relation between male and female. Bible language isn't simply culturally conditioned; the language itself conveys a divinely established relationship between the two genders God created. In fact, this Bible language should infuse the way we use language today – but that's another topic....

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One practical application of the Lord's insistence on male-headship is that women are to be silent in the church and not to exercise authority over man (1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12). Very rightly our Committee on Bible Translation draws attention to passages where the translation undermines this instruction. But if one embraces a translation that elsewhere corrodes the male-headship principle (by using the singular 'they', replacing 'brothers' with 'brothers and sisters', etc), does one not ultimately *undermine the reasons why* Paul insists that women are not to serve in the special offices of the church? My point: my objections to the NIV₂₀₁₁ extend deeper than the "numerically speaking ... few" texts that touch explicitly on the subject of the special offices. This translation has "let our culture shape the wording, instead of letting the wording of scripture shape our culture." [2] As a result, we'll end up reading the Bible through today's glasses – instead of evaluating today's culture through Biblical glasses.

That, I think, is dangerous.

C Bouwman
February 7, 2012

[1] As the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood put it in their *Evaluation of Gender Language in the 2011 Edition of the NIV*, available at <http://www.cbmw.org/Resources/Articles/An-Evaluation-of-Gender-Language-in-the>

[2] see http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/article.aspx?subjectid=18&articleid=20110702_18_A15_CUTLIN491043